

THE CHOICE IN VIETNAM

by Richard Nixon
March 15, 1965

The opposition to American policy in Vietnam has reached formidable proportions at home and abroad.

Newsweek reported on March 1 that forty-five Democratic Senators have publicly or privately expressed serious doubts about the wisdom of our present policy in Vietnam.

The New York Times, Walter Lippmann and many other papers and pundits have added their influential voices to the chorus of opposition.

Full page ads by university students and teachers have called for a halt to American air attacks on North Vietnam and for a negotiation now.

The World Council of Churches takes a similar position.

Abroad, the French and Russians publicly and the British privately are urging negotiation now.

In the United Nations U Thant has added his influential voice in support of this position.

Criticism of this magnitude cannot be brushed aside by resorting to the usual platitudes and generalities such as "We seek no wider war" and "Our objective is the cause of freedom."

I believe that a majority of the American people support the President in the strong policy he is presently following. But as James Reston wrote recently "There is an uneasy fatalism in the country because no one knows the answers. Major issues have not been debated in an orderly manner."

The case for getting out of Vietnam has been stated forcibly and in depth by the critics of the policy. It is time that the case for staying in Vietnam be stated with equal force and detail.

The American people are entitled to know why we are there, what is at stake, the risks that are involved and the goals we seek.

There are four major objections to the present policy.

- (1) America has no legal right to intervene in a civil war.
- (2) Vietnam can't be saved because the Vietnamese aren't willing to save themselves.
- (3) The risk of spreading the war is too great.
- (4) Seeking a negotiated settlement now is a better course of action than stepping up our attacks on North Vietnam.

To answer these objections it is first necessary to set the record straight as to who is responsible for the war in Vietnam.

Not A Civil War

This is not a civil war. There would be no war in Vietnam today were it not for the support the guerillas in South Vietnam are receiving from Communist North Vietnam. And the North Vietnamese could not have provided this assistance without the support they have received from the Chinese Communists.

The confrontation in Vietnam is in the final analysis not between the Vietnamese and the Vietcong guerillas nor between the United States and North Vietnam but between the United States and Communist China. A United States defeat in Vietnam means a Chinese Communist victory.

Our Legal Rights

The argument that the United States has no legal right to be in Vietnam is exactly the opposite of the truth.

The 1954 Geneva Convention, which was signed by both North Vietnam and Communist China, guaranteed the independence of South Vietnam against foreign aggression. The North Vietnamese, supported by the Communist Chinese, have invaded Vietnam in violation of that treaty. The United States on the other hand is in Vietnam by the invitation of the South Vietnamese government for the express purpose of enforcing the treaty. The North Vietnamese are the law breakers; we are the law enforcers.

The Stakes

At stake in this struggle is the fate of the fifteen million people who live in South Vietnam. The great majority of them do not want to come under Communist domination because they know what a mess Communism has made of North Vietnam. It is claimed that they will not fight for their freedom. But 200,000 casualties suffered in the battle against Communism proves otherwise.

It could be contended that fifteen million people in a relatively small country are not worth the risk of a major war particularly when their leaders are quarreling among themselves.

But the stakes are much higher. What is involved in this war is not just the fate of Vietnam but the fate of all of Southeast Asia.

If Vietnam is lost, Laos which is already practically gone because of our gullibility in attempting to neutralize it in 1962 would certainly go down the drain.

Cambodia is leaning so far in the direction of Communism that the loss of Vietnam would push it over the brink.

Thailand wants to be on our side. But, it is a nation that has survived for a thousand years only by being on the winning side and a Communist victory in South Vietnam would be a devastating argument as to who will win in Asia.

Socialist Burma is an economic basket case and the Red tide, once rolling, would have little difficulty in engulfing it.

Malaysia, its ten million people surrounded by a sea of Communism, could not survive.

Then there is the biggest prize in Southeast Asia, Indonesia. Indonesia will go the way Sukarno goes. A reporter from The New York Times on January 8th wrote "Diplomats think Sukarno is heading toward alignment with Communist China. Communist successes in Vietnam have convinced him that Chinese Communism is the wave of the future in Asia." Already far down the road toward alignment with Communist China, Indonesia would certainly fall and this means that the Communists would have control over ninety million people with the richest natural resources of the area.

The battle for Vietnam then is not just about Vietnam. It is about all of Southeast Asia. It is not about just fifteen million people but about two hundred million people and an area which produces over half the world's tin, half the world's rubber and untapped natural resources of immense value to a hungry, developing power like Communist China.

But this is not all. Indonesia stretches a thousand miles across the South China seas to a point only 14 miles from the Philippines. Communist supported guerilla actions in the Philippines would inevitably follow a Communist take over of Indonesia. If this should happen does anyone seriously suggest that the United States would not then have to fight a war - probably a major war to save the Philippines?

The Greatest Prize

But the stakes are even higher. The greatest prize in Asia is Japan, a miracle of economic recovery since World War II and the greatest industrial power in Asia. Japan is the only country with a possible chance to counterbalance China once China develops its industrial might. Southeast Asia, next to the United States, constitutes Japan's biggest trading area. If this area comes under Communist domination Japan will inevitably be pulled toward neutralism and even toward a pro-Communist position in order to survive economically.

The Battle for Asia

In summary we cannot ignore these inevitable conclusions:

The battle for Vietnam is the battle for Asia.
If the United States gives up on Vietnam, Asia
will give up on the United States and the
Pacific will become a Red Sea.

But the effect of the loss of Vietnam would not be limited to Asia. There is a great debate going on in the Communist world today between the hard liners in Peking and the so-called soft liners in Moscow. The hard liners contend that world Communism must continue to seek its ultimate objective of world domination through support of revolution throughout the world. For them the war in Vietnam is only a prologue for similar "wars of liberation" in the rest of Asia, the Near East, Africa and Latin America.

The soft liners in Moscow presently oppose this course of action. They do not wish to risk another confrontation such as occurred in the Cuban missile crisis. They say the way to achieve the goal of a Communist world is through temporary coexistence with the West and "peaceful" competition.

If the Communists win in Vietnam this will be an immense victory for the hard liners. They will then be able to argue that if the hard line worked in Vietnam it will work elsewhere. They will contend that the Free World has no effective answer to Communist conquest by support of revolution.

A Communist victory in Vietnam would be the green light for Communist instigation and support of Vietnam type "wars of liberation" all over the world.

By fighting the Korean War we put a stop to Communist conquest by direct aggression. Since Korea the Communists have not attempted to take over a country through the traditional method of marching men across a border. They knew we would react and they considered the risk too great.

The issue in Vietnam is whether we are going to put a stop to Communist conquest by indirect aggression, just as the issue in Korea was whether we were to stop Communist conquest by direct aggression.

Our Choices - Get Out

In view of the stakes involved the suggestion that we wash our hands of this miserable conflict and get out of Vietnam is unthinkable.

Our Choices - Negotiation

But why don't we negotiate now? This is the question which is being increasingly raised by critics of the present policy.

The best answer to this question is to pose another question - what do we negotiate at this time?

Vietnam has already been negotiated once. In 1954 the country was partitioned and the Communists took the north half of it. Do we now negotiate it again and give the Communists half of what is left of Free Vietnam?

Our Choices - Neutralization

Why not then negotiate the neutralization of Vietnam? Laos proved the stupidity of this course of action. An agreement with the Communists to neutralize a country is simply surrender on the installment plan. It means just three things. We get out. They stay in. They take over.

When we negotiate with the Communists we must recognize that our motives are different from theirs. We go to the conference table to promote peace. They go there to win victory. Communist tactics in negotiation can be summed up in four sentences.

First, they demand something to which they are not entitled.

Second, they threaten war if they are not given what they demand.

Third, they insist we negotiate to avoid war.

Fourth, if we do negotiate, their price for peace is half of what they were not entitled to in the first place.

This does not mean that we should never negotiate. All wars are eventually ended by negotiation. It does mean that we should determine now what our goals are and not negotiate until the time comes when we can achieve those goals at the conference table.

We can never negotiate surrender, retreat, neutralization or partition of Vietnam.

We must insist on one absolute condition in any negotiations - guaranteed freedom for Vietnam from Communist aggression. Until we are in a position to demand that the Communists accept that condition, we should not negotiate.

Our Choices - Turn It Over To the U.N.

U Thant's recommendation that this controversy be settled by the United Nations must also be rejected. The United Nations can serve a very useful purpose in working out peaceful solutions for some international problems. But where the ultimate security of the United States and the Free World is involved, policy must be made by the United States and not by the United Nations.

The United States as the strongest of the Free Nations must not have its policies in defense of freedom watered down to what only the weak and timid among the so-called neutral nations will approve. We must recognize that no nation in the world could afford the luxury of neutrality today if it were not for the power of the United States.

The Only Choice

The only acceptable course of action is to end the war by winning it in South Vietnam. To accomplish this objective it will be necessary to quarantine South Vietnam by cutting off the flow of arms and men from North Vietnam. Strikes on selected targets in North Vietnam should be made on a continuing and increasing basis until the North Vietnamese completely discontinue their assistance to the guerilla forces in South Vietnam. The following guidelines should apply to the United States commitment:

- (1) The strikes on North Vietnam should be on military targets only.
- (2) No atomic weapons should be used.
- (3) The South Vietnamese should continue to have the responsibility to provide the ground forces for fighting the guerillas in South Vietnam. American ground forces at this time should be used only for the purpose of defending American and South Vietnamese installations.

- (4) American air power should be used to the extent necessary to carry out the missions against military targets in North Vietnam and also to provide tactical support for Vietnamese ground forces fighting in South Vietnam.

Prospects for Success

Will carrying out such a policy assure victory in South Vietnam? Critics of the policy often raise this question: If three hundred thousand French troops could not win victory in 1954 in Vietnam when they were actually doing the ground fighting themselves how can we expect twenty-one thousand Americans who are in Vietnam only as advisors to accomplish this objective?

There is a fundamental difference. In 1954 the French were fighting to stay in Vietnam. Our objective is to get out of Vietnam just as soon as Vietnam's independence is secure. The South Vietnamese naturally had little interest in fighting for French Colonialism. They have a very vital interest in fighting against Communist Colonialism.

The Risks - Soviet Intervention

What are the risks of this policy? Most observers agree that the possibility of Soviet intervention is relatively small. The situation in Vietnam is very different from the one we confronted at the time of the Korean War. Then Russia and China were allies and from a logistical and geographical standpoint Korea was very close to Russia. Any action on our part which threatened China might conceivably bring Russia to China's assistance.

Today the Soviet Union and Red China are enemies - engaged in a life and death struggle for power in the Communist world. Rather than wanting to see the Red Chinese succeed in their conquest of Asia the Russians would like nothing better than to see them fail. Furthermore from a logistical standpoint transporting men and arms from Russia to Vietnam - thousands of miles away is infinitely more difficult than it was to deliver them to nearby Korea.

The Risks - Chinese Intervention

The widely held assumption that Communist China would inevitably intervene in the event the war began to go badly for the North Vietnamese is not well founded. China without the support of Russia is a fourth-rate military power. If the Chinese decided to enter the war in Vietnam they would be no match for the awesome air and sea power the United States could bring to bear upon the Chinese mainland. For them to take such a risk would be rash and foolhardy, and the Chinese by nature are basically cautious in their foreign policy decisions.

But in making a decision of this magnitude we must not gloss over the fact that there is some risk that the Communist Chinese might intervene in order to save the North Vietnamese from defeat. But taking this risk into account our policy decision should be the same. As is usually the case in making decisions, the choice is not between one policy involving some risk and another involving none, but between one policy involving some risk and another policy involving an even greater risk.

In the final analysis we must recognize that the risk involved in ending the war in Vietnam by winning it is far less than the risk involved in losing it. If Vietnam is lost either by our withdrawal or by our negotiating now - which would lead to its loss - the Chinese Communists would gain a great victory and the Red tide would sweep irresistibly over the rest of Southeast Asia. Four or five years later we would then be confronted with the necessity of facing up to Chinese Communist aggression in the Philippines or in Australia.

The risk then would be infinitely greater than it is now. Time is not on our side but on Red China's side. Every day that passes the Chinese nuclear capability increases and their industrial and military productivity becomes far more formidable than it is today. Five years or ten years from now we might not be able to take a stand against this power without running a massive risk of nuclear war.

If Chinese Communist aggression is to be stopped in Asia it must be stopped now or it may be too late to do so later.

One of the major arguments against our present policy is that it will spread the war. Exactly the opposite is the case.

The cause of the war in Vietnam is aggressive international Communism. If Communism spreads, the war will spread. The way to keep the war from spreading is to keep Communism from spreading.

The Lessons of Vietnam

The only purpose of pointing up some of the mistakes that have been made in the past is to avoid making those same mistakes in the future.

Diem's Murder

Our greatest mistake was in putting political reform before military victory in dealing with the Diem regime. Diem, and more particularly some members of his family, were without question at times hard crosses for America to bear in Vietnam. But when the United States supported a coup d'etat which led to his murder we set in motion a violent chain reaction not only in Vietnam but throughout Southeast Asia.

The musical chairs routine in Vietnam with one coup following another was stimulated and encouraged by our conduct in the Diem affair. And our refusal to stand by a friend when he got into trouble had repercussions in other Asian countries as well. I was talking to one of America's best friends in Asia shortly after Diem's death. He said that to him and others in similar leadership positions Diem's death meant just three things: It is dangerous to be a friend of the United States. It pays to be a neutral, and it sometimes helps to be an enemy.

In the final analysis we must recognize that while it has worked reasonably well in our country, U.S. style democracy will not work and should not be imposed in countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Economic Aid Not the Answer

Another lesson from the past in Vietnam is that economic aid alone will not stop Communist aggression. We have poured hundreds of millions of dollars into Vietnam in economic assistance with the result that conditions in South Vietnam are infinitely better than in Communist North Vietnam. But a conversation I had with a village chief near Saigon last Spring pinpoints the inadequacy of economic aid alone as an answer to Communism. I asked him what he would prefer if he had his choice of anything the United States could provide for him. He could have answered "a new school, a new road, a new well, more food." But he said simply, "What we need is security." And small wonder - just the week before the village next to his had been overrun by the Communists and its chief had been murdered and his body mutilated.

Political reform and economic assistance in countries that are the target of indirect Communist aggression are important adjuncts to any overall policy. But when the enemy is waging an all-out war against the existing government, military victory must be given priority above everything else.

Need for a New Asian Policy

The greatest lesson we can learn from our experience in Vietnam is that U.S./Asian policy needs a complete reappraisal. The spectacle of the United States having to intervene virtually alone to save the freedom of Vietnam is not a pretty one.

The battle for Vietnam is the battle for Free Asia and those who have the greatest stake in the outcome of that battle are those who live in Asia. But because the United States has assumed so much of the responsibility for defending Vietnam, other Asian nations are either openly neutral or quietly acquiescent as far as our policy is concerned.

It is time for the United States to take the initiative in urging the calling of a conference of Free Asian nations with the express objective of stopping Communist aggression in Asia. Japan, South Korea, Nationalist China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Australia, New Zealand and Thailand are the countries which would probably have the greatest common interest in participating in such a conference. From this conference could come long range programs for military and economic cooperation. But above all an agreement should be reached that if any one of the Free Asian nations is threatened directly or indirectly by Communist aggression all would join together to supply the forces necessary to resist that aggression.

The future of Asia must and should be determined in the final analysis by Asians and not by Americans or Europeans. The Chinese Communists have left no doubt as to what they plan for Asia's future. The time has come for Free Asian nations to counter this awesome threat with a plan and purpose of their own.

The Lesson of History

Vietnam is only a small state on the great map of Asia. But for those who would discount its importance because of its size, I commend the words of Winston Churchill written in 1938 after the partition of Czechoslovakia at Munich:

"The belief that security can be obtained by throwing a small state to the wolves is a fatal delusion."

Those words are as true about Vietnam today as they were true about Czechoslovakia in 1938. In this year 1965 when we honor Churchill's memory, let us also honor his principles.